# THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

# Abundance

## John M. Buchanan
## March 26, 2000

The feeding of the multitudes ... is an example of the new world coming into being through God. When the disciples, charged with feeding the hungry crowd, found a child with five loaves and two fishes, Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. He demonstrated that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. If bread is broken and shared, there is enough for all... the creation is infused with the Creator's generosity, and we can find practices, procedures and institutions that allow that generosity to work.

Walter Brueggemann
*The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity*

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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# ABUNDANCE

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Exodus 16: 1-4
Mark 6: 30-44

*Startle us, O God, with your truth. Startle us with the wonder of your presence in the world, in the beauty of this day and the quiet of this hour. We bring our hearts and souls and minds; we bring our worries and fears but also our hopes and joys and deepest love. Gather it up, O God and help us in this hour to know your love for us, your will for our lives and your promise that you can use us to do the work of your Kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The last time the story of the Loaves and Fishes was read from this pulpit the preacher was Quaker theologian/philosopher Parker Palmer. Palmer told an unforgettable story in that sermon and on the outside chance that you weren't here that Sunday—five years ago, or if you were, that you may have forgotten, I am going to tell it again.

After all, someone has already observed that there are only about six really good ideas, and all religion and politics and art are variations on one of those six.

Palmer was a passenger on a plane that pulled away from the gate, taxied to a remote corner of the field and stopped. You know the feeling: the plane stops and you look out the window and see that you're not on the runway and the engines wind down and your heart sinks. The pilot came on the inter-com and said, "I have some bad news and some really bad news. The bad news is there's a storm front in the west, Denver is socked in and shut down. We've looked at the alternatives and there are none. So we'll be staying here for a few hours. That's the bad news. The really bad news is that we have no food and it's lunch time." Everybody groaned. Some passengers started to complain, some became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants did something amazing.

She stood up and took the inter-com mike and said, "We're really sorry folks. We didn't plan it this way and we really can't do much about it. And I know for some of you this is a big deal. Some of you are really hungry and were looking forward to a nice lunch. Some of you may have a medical condition and really need lunch. Some of you may not care one way or the other and some of you need to skip lunch. So I'll tell you what we're going to do. I have a couple of breadbaskets up here and we're going to pass them around and I'm asking everybody to put something in the basket. Some of you brought a little snack along—something to tide you over—just in case something like this happened, some peanut butter crackers, candy bars. And some of you have a few LifeSavers or chewing gum or Rolaids. And if you don't have anything edible, you have a picture of your children or spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or a bookmark or a business card. Everybody put something in and then we'll reverse the process. We'll pass the baskets around again and everybody can take out what he/she needs.

"Well," Palmer said, "what happened next was amazing. The griping stopped. People started to root around in pockets and handbags, some got up and opened their suitcases stored in the overhead luggage racks and got out boxes of candy, a salami, a bottle of wine. People were laughing and talking. She had transformed a group of people who were focused on need and deprivation into a community of sharing and celebration. She had transformed scarcity into a kind of abundance."

After the flight, which eventually did proceed, Parker Palmer stopped on his way off the plane—deplaning, that is—and said to her, "Do you know there's a story in the Bible about what you did back there? It's about Jesus feeding a lot of people with very little food." "Yes," she said. "I know that story. That's why I did what I did."

It's a beloved story. Everybody knows it. It is the only miracle story of Jesus recorded in all four Gospels.

In the Gospel of Mark, the first to be written, it occurs in a wonderful series of stories with which Mark is introducing to the world the person and the mission of Jesus. In Jesus, Mark is saying, the Kingdom of God is present. In the restoring to full and healthy life, a man who was mentally ill, a feverish old woman, a despised sinner, a helpless paralytic, a woman with a 12 year hemorrhage, a dead little girl, God's Kingdom is present in the life of the world.

The stories are remarkable because of their literary economy and precision and the power of detail. This one is gorgeous. Jesus' reputation as a healer has spread throughout Galilee. Everywhere he goes, crowds gather, so many people in fact, that he is not able to move freely. One of the ways he deals with the crowds, when he needs to move on, is to get in a boat and sail away. That's what's happening in this story. The crowd is there. His disciples have just returned from their first attempt at imitating his ministry of visiting Galilean towns, teaching and healing. They want to report what happened. Jesus is eager to hear, and besides, they're hungry. But the crowd is there, pressing in, eager for a word, a touch, a healing. So they get in the boat. But instead of dispersing, the crowd follows along the shoreline, straggling, stumbling along, so that when the boat arrives at what they hoped would be a quiet spot where they could talk and eat together, there they were again, only more of them now. They looked, he said, like a great flock of sheep without its shepherd and the sight of it moved him deeply. So he got out of the boat and talked to them on the shore beside the lake as the sun was setting. Pope John Paul II visited the spot last week.

Perhaps a little impatiently—the disciples want his time, too; they're hungry; perhaps impatiently they suggest that it's time to call it a day: "Send the crowd away now," they tell him. It's evening, dinner time—time for everybody to go home for dinner, or to one of the towns around here to buy some food.

" . . . You give them something to eat," he says and it's a ridiculous thing to say because they hadn't prepared for a big picnic. Bread for this crowd would cost two hundred dinari and we don't have a penny. "Well," says Jesus, "what kind of food do you have? I

know you have some bread." So they rooted in their pockets and packs and what they came up with wasn't much—five loaves of bread and five fish.

That might have been enough to give each one of them about a third of a loaf of bread and a few bites of dried, salt fish—not a lot, but tasty and enough—for them. But for this crowd—absurd.

And Mark keeps giving us these gorgeous details.

"Tell them to sit down on the green grass." Why tell us that the grass was green, unless he's wanting us to see a picture of abundance and lushness and fertility; the sensuality of God's creation, its goodness and its adequacy? So they sat and he took what they had and looked to the heavens and blessed and broke the bread and divided the fish and it was not only enough, to feed every hunger there, but so abundant that there were leftovers—twelve baskets full.

That's what God's Kingdom looks like—abundance shared; available resources multiplied when people bring what they have to be shared with all.

It's a challenging story. All of Mark's pictures of God's Kingdom challenge the status quo, this one particularly. Walter Brueggeman writes:

> "The majority of the world's resources pour into the United States. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our prosperity or the poverty of so many others." ("The Liturgy of Abundance: The Myth of Scarcity," *The Christian Century*, 3/24-31/99)

We have a friend from Romania who is a United States citizen and who, a few years ago, was able to bring her Romanian mother to Chicago for a visit. When the daughter took her mother grocery shopping to Treasure Island, and they walked to the fresh produce department, with that glorious kaleidoscope of bright colors: oranges, limes, lemons, grapefruit, apples, peaches, pears, piles of grapes; and then, opposite, five varieties of lettuce, cabbage, red and white onions, mountains of potatoes, mushrooms, celery, turnips, pale and deep green, with a fine mist glistening on everything. And the elderly Romanian woman burst into tears. She had never seen anything like it, had never seen so much food, fresh, beautiful food, in her life. And she would not believe that it would all be there again the next day, insisted that her daughter take her—not to the Sears Tower or Marshall Fields, or the zoo, but to the fresh produce department at Treasure Island every day to see the food.

"We hardly notice our prosperity . . . .We have invested our lives in consumerism," Bruggemann says; "We have a love affair with 'more' and we will never have enough."

Bruggemann's thesis is that we believe more in a myth of scarcity than in the reality of abundance. We believe, Bruggemann says, that there is not enough for everybody so we have to get more. Political tyranny, Bruggemann says, begins in the Bible when, in times of famine, Pharaoh says "let's get it all." When you believe in scarcity, you can never have

enough. Someone asked Anne Lamott in a magazine interview recently what it's like to make a lot of money after being poor most of her adult life.

Lamott's response was a good one. "It's confusing," she said. "It's more fun not to be borrowing rent—nice to be the person that people come to for loans instead of being the person borrowing. I had the fantasy that if I made a certain amount of money I'd be okay, that I'd be okay and stop thinking about it. Then I got to that level and discovered that the drug of choice is "more." (*Day by Day,* in Common Boundary, Arline Klatte Ennis, Sept/Oct 1999, p. 18-24)

When you believe more in scarcity than you do in abundance, you can't get enough. Bruggemann has a wonderful image of it. "If you are like me," he says, "while you read the Bible you keep looking at the screen to see how the market is doing. If you are like me, you read the Bible on a good day, but you read the Nike ads every day. And according to the Nike ads, whoever dies with the most shoes wins—whatever you end up with is what you have managed to get for yourself."

The challenging word of the Bible is about abundance, the adequacy of God's gifts to fulfill our deepest needs, our most urgent hunger. There is enough.

When the children of Israel saw the flaky white substance lying all around the ground every morning, they said, "What is this stuff?"—the Hebrew for which is "manna," God's gifts—right in front of your eyes—God's abundance which requires only human ingenuity and creativity and enterprise to be adequate. Only you can't save it up and hoard it. It spoils. You can only live in trust that it will be there again in the morning.

Anne Lamott writes, "I know people who have a lot of money and are very stressed. I know people who don't have money and I would trade places with them in a second. But the spiritually fit think, "you know what? God is providing every single day exactly what this family needs."

So what do you do if you don't experience abundance? Lamott has a novel prescription—"I know that if I feel any deprivation or fear, the solution is to give. The solution is to go find some mothers on the streets of San Rafael and give them tens and twenties and mail off another fifty to Doctors without Borders in Kosovo. Because I know that giving is the way we can feel abundant. Giving is the way we fill ourselves up."

That's what the Church of Jesus Christ is for: to show the world what that looks like; our responsibility is to see and to remember these pictures of God's Kingdom and then to recreate them for the world to see.

It's not always easy—in a world that is more convinced of scarcity than abundance. We live in a time of unprecedented, almost unimaginable affluence and still have the largest underclass in the Western world.

For two decades, the rich have been getting richer and the poor, poorer, and everybody knows it, and everybody knows it is dangerous politically not to mention ethically, and we're in the middle of a political campaign and nobody is even talking about it.

Jesus transformed his follower's focus on scarcity into an experience of God's abundance and the adequacy of what they had, when they offered it and used it and shared it.

Tom Brokaw, in his book, *The Greatest Generation,* records the wartime experience of former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield. As a young Ensign in the Navy during World War II, Hatfield was the skipper of a landing craft ferrying Marines from the troop ship to the beaches at Iwo Jima and returning with the wounded and dying. It was very hazardous duty. He looked up one day and actually saw the legendary raising of the flag on Mt. Suribachi.

Later, he was assigned to a ship that accompanied the USS Missouri into Tokyo Bay for the formal surrender and then was assigned to one of the first crews to inspect Hiroshima. He remembers: "This was about a month after the bomb had been dropped. There was a smell to the city—and total silence. It was amazing to see the utter and indiscriminate devastation in every direction and to think that just one bomb had done it."

Hatfield says as the American party sailed into the canals, Japanese parents and their children watched silently. "When we landed, the little kids saw we weren't going to kill or shoot them, so they began to gather around. We realized they were very hungry, so we took our lunches and broke them up and gave them to as many kids as we could."

In that moment, Hatfield came to realize something that stays with him to this day: "You learn to hate with a passion in wartime," he says. "If you don't kill your enemy, they'll kill you. But sharing those sandwiches with the people who had been my enemy was sort of therapy for me. I could almost feel the hate leaving me. It was almost a spiritual experience." (Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation,* p. 334-337)

When Jesus shifted the focus from looking at those loaves and fishes as a scarce resource to be saved, conserved, hoarded, to looking at them as a precious gift from God, a resource to be used and shared, he moved from fear to love, from death to life, from the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of God.

That same transformation is there for you and me. It is an option—a real alternative, you know. We can trust him. We can stop despairing that our meager personal resources are not adequate, that our problems are much larger than our ability to solve them, that we don't have enough time or money or energy or intelligence or imagination—to meet the challenges we are facing this week as parents, as spouses, in our intimate relationships, that we don't have enough to meet the challenges at work, or in our families, or our careers, our own health. We could, you know, risk trusting the opposite of that litany of scarcity that drives and determines so much of our lives—risk trusting that when we bring what we have, when we offer what we have to whatever challenge is facing us, God multiplies, empowers, uses, creates and provides.

He took the meagerest of resources, five loaves and two fish and transformed them into an abundance, adequate—more than adequate, for the needs of the people following him.

**That is the promise to you and me. We believe He is the bread of life, He is the food we most desperately need. And to trust him—to commit our lives, everything we have and are and will be to him—our skills, our resources, our education, our time—to offer up our loaves and fishes, is to know his gracious generosity and his power to transform our scarcity into abundance. It is to be, quite simply, gloriously alive, saved, free.**

**There is enough.**

**There will be enough, more than enough, a generous overflowing abundance of love and grace and provision and food.**

**Thanks be to God.**